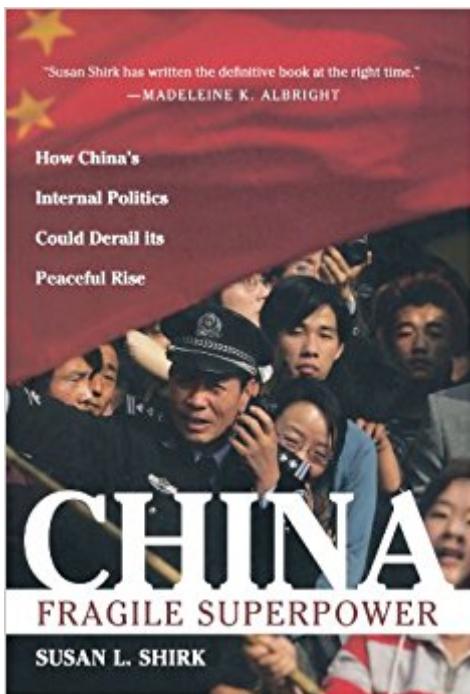


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China: Fragile Superpower



Synopsis

Once a sleeping giant, China today is the world's fastest growing economy--the leading manufacturer of cell phones, laptop computers, and digital cameras--a dramatic turn-around that alarms many Westerners. But in China: Fragile Superpower, Susan L. Shirk opens up the black box of Chinese politics and finds that the real danger lies elsewhere--not in China's astonishing growth, but in the deep insecurity of its leaders. China's leaders face a troubling paradox: the more developed and prosperous the country becomes, the more insecure and threatened they feel. Shirk, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for China, knows many of today's Chinese rulers personally and has studied them for three decades. She offers invaluable insight into how they think--and what they fear. In this revealing book, readers see the world through the eyes of men like President Hu Jintao and former President Jiang Zemin. We discover a fragile communist regime desperate to survive in a society turned upside down by miraculous economic growth and a stunning new openness to the greater world. Indeed, ever since the 1989 pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square and the fall of communism in the Soviet Union, Chinese leaders have been afraid of its own citizens, and this fear motivates many of their decisions when dealing with the U.S. and other nations. In particular, the fervent nationalism of the Chinese people, combined with their passionate resentment of Japan and attachment to Taiwan, have made relations with this country a minefield. The paperback edition features a new preface by the author.

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Customer Reviews

"One of the best books I read on China."--Nicholas D. Kristof, *The New York Times*"Ms. Shirk's magisterial book gazes down on China from above."--*The Economist*"Revelatory...Shirk has written an important book at an important moment, with the Beijing Olympics approaching and a new Chinese product scandal breaking practically every week. China: Fragile Superpower should change our assessment of China's leadership, which is a lot less stable than many of us thought."--*Washington Post Book World*"In her extremely convincing book, she shows that there is another emotional side which, driven by unresolved internal tensions, could still push China into a military confrontation."--*Financial Times*"Shirk's depth of knowledge about China - including personal acquaintance with many of its leaders - makes this book a valuable read."--*Christian Science Monitor*"Now more than ever we need a realistic approach for dealing with China's rising power. Susan Shirk has an insider's grasp of China's politics and a firm understanding of what makes its leaders tick. *China: Fragile Superpower* is an important and necessary book."--Brent Scowcroft, former U.S. National Security Advisor"Susan Shirk's lively and perceptive book examines the constraints on Chinese foreign policy in an era of rapid socio-economic change.... Shirk brings a wealth of experience as an astute observer of Chinese politics and as a practitioner of track I and II diplomacy toward China to illuminate the relationship between domestic legitimacy dilemmas and foreign security dilemmas."-- Alastair Iain Johnston, The Laine Professor of China in World Affairs, Harvard"Although other problems dominate the news today, a rising China presents America's greatest long-term challenge. Susan Shirk's excellent book argues compellingly that it also poses the greatest challenge to China's leaders. How they meet this challenge affects not only China, but also the U.S. and, indeed, the world."--William J. Perry, former U.S. Secretary of Defense"In this eye-opening work, Susan Shirk details China's incredible economic progress while lifting the rug on its severe internal problems. She has injected a dose of realism into a distorted vision of China which has been promoted by gushing China watchers who focus on Shanghai's skyline."--James Lilley, Former American Ambassador to South Korea and China

Susan L. Shirk is Director of the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, and Professor at UC-San Diego's Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies. A leading authority on China, she has written numerous books and articles on this subject, including pieces that have appeared in *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

Susan Shirk was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for relations with China in the

Clinton administration and she is now director of the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. In this extremely well informed book she reflects on her lifetimes' experience with Chinese affairs and explains why China is more of a "fragile" superpower than is immediately apparent to Western observers. The basic problem is that Communist ideology doesn't convince the Chinese (or anyone else) any longer, so in fear for their own survival, the Chinese Communist leadership have fomented and appropriated a strident form of nationalism directed at the Japanese, Taiwanese and Americans, in that order. She gives full credit to the economic reforms and openness initiated by Deng Xiaoping, quoting the World Bank in saying that since 1979 the reforms have lifted 400 million people out of poverty, which is a remarkable figure. The Chinese take pride in their achievement but her opinion is that a combination of pride and nationalism + a newly informed population thanks to the Internet, risks popular demands for military action that the Politbureau could not hold back (and remain in power) - in other words, they would be hostage to their own nationalist creation. The Chinese people also leave the Communist government alone while they provide the economic conditions for growth to absorb the rural workforce as it migrates to the cities. A war would obviously break this link but she doesn't really consider other ways that this arrangement could fall apart. As of 2010 the Chinese economy is overheating and could expect some economic instability, either from interior conditions or from exterior ones resulting from China's high level of integration into the world economy. I feel that this is an important point that she doesn't explore sufficiently, but otherwise the book is easily worth 5 stars.

'China: Fragile Superpower' is a book that shows that Susan Shirk is someone who really knows the country of her specialty--as much as anyone who is not a Chinese government official could. Wish she were still in the State department. I am an expat who has lived in China for quite a few years now, so a fair bit of the knowledge was already known to me or to anyone keeping abreast of Chinese affairs--especially having lived through many of the incidents in the book, such as the Hainan Spy Plane incident and the embassy bombing in Yugoslavia. Yet, even in those episodes, I learned something new. It lets one see how to look at issues from the eyes of a Chinese leader. Decisions that may seem counterproductive are actually best for the regime's grip on power. The book is mainly organized around foreign policy dealing with the United States, Japan, Taiwan, and a bit of other Asian countries to the exclusion of countries elsewhere. However, she has good rationale for concentrating in those areas as those are the drivers of policy, due to citizen sensitivity to those issues. The organization of the book forces discussion of domestic issues into how they drive or are driven by issues with the US/Taiwan/Japan rather than chapters solely on domestic

issues. I suppose this is natural since she is a diplomat. I mostly agree with her practical arguments about what China could do better to be a more responsible and stable superpower, and what the US could do in return. I do think the government has been incredibly wily at knowing when to allow citizens to let the steam off and when to put the cap back on. The leaders know the economy is important and rightfully fear a downturn. Everything may blow, but who knows when. There are a few pages towards the beginning and scattered at points throughout the book where she delves into the workings within the government, but I wish she gone into more detail about the formal government structure (because it is still murky after all these years here).

Almost invariably, every diplomat, think-tanker, journalist, and (of course) academic who has devoted a significant portion of his or her life studying the elusive and enigmatic nature of the modern Chinese state writes a book about China. These proliferating volumes vary widely in quality, and usually have rather short shelf lives. Susan Shirk's contribution to the genre, *CHINA: FRAGILE SUPERPOWER*, is worthy of your attention. Shirk, a former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, published her book before October 2007's Seventeenth Party Congress, which at first might seem odd---wouldn't an author want to wait to see how the future Chinese leadership might be shaping up and comment on that?---but it becomes apparent in reading her book that Shirk is really focused on greater, less fungible forces shaping the situation in China, in particular, mass Chinese public (at least, that which has access to the Internet) reaction to foreign events that affect China as well as to Chinese leadership decisions that impinge against China's national esteem or world status. Shirk's greatest contribution is in the latter half of her book, in which she analyzes China's relationship with Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. In the final pages, she summarizes some of her thoughts on how the U.S. and China should best proceed in their relationship in next few years. Shirk's book, like many in its genre, is part memoir, which I think is unfortunate. Though her personal recollections might be seen as providing the book both legitimacy for her views and a kind of human-interest element, I found her interpolations of self into the historical narratives almost Zelig-like. I think her book would have been stronger without these elements. That having been said, I think she could write a fascinating memoir of her experiences, and I would be sorely tempted to read it. *CHINA: FRAGILE SUPERPOWER* is a worthy contribution to the China policy books of the past couple of years. Any student, scholar, or policy wonk interested in contemporary China would be well advised to become familiar with it.

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